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ABSTRACT

This monograph discusses the characteristics, tasks, and benefits of interdisciplinary team organization in middle schools. Characteristics include teachers who share a common group of students, a common planning period, and adjacent classroom space. Team tasks are composed of scheduling, grouping students, identifying curriculum topics and materials, developing discipline codes, and determining grading standards. The report concludes by citing the advantages of interdisciplinary team organization, which include student affective growth, integrated learning experiences, improved discipline, warmer student-teacher relationships, more flexible instruction, enhanced teacher empowerment and professionalism, and greater school spirit. (JAM)

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California League of Middle Schools

Practitioner's Monograph #7:

# INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION IN THE MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL

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June, 1989

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**The California League of Middle Schools** is an association of people who are interested in furthering the growth and development of middle schools and middle school concepts. The League is composed of parents, teachers, school and district administrators, State Department of Education officials, and others who have an interest in the education of early adolescents.

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> The interdisciplinary organization of teachers is both the most distinguishing feature of the middle school, and the keystone of its structure. In the presence of a stable interdisciplinary team organization, other components of the program function much more smoothly. In its absence they operate with considerably more difficulty, if they exist at all.[1]
>
> The key to middle schools is the interdisciplinary team. All other aspects depend on the fostering, nurturing, encouraging, and developing of strong teams.[2]
>
> Superintendents and principals should ensure that the concept of *team organization* characterizes and permeates the structure of middle grade schools. Specifically, teachers should:
> a. Share the same students as extensively as possible.
> b. Work together with the needs of those common students in mind. (*Caught in the Middle*, Recommendation #1 on Structure)[3]

Clearly, many middle level educators consider interdisciplinary teaming important. This is not simply a philosophical stance; it is a widespread practice. In 1985, George and Oldaker studied 130 exemplary middle schools. They found that: "Interdisciplinary team organization is a central feature of 90 percent of the schools in the study. Common groups of students taught by an interdisciplinary team of teachers who are located closely together and who have common planning periods is the rule in the schools in this study."[4]

## DEFINING INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION

Although this is frequently called "interdisciplinary team *teaching*," this is not team teaching in the traditional sense: it does not require two teachers to instruct one class at the same time. Joint instructional planning and coordination in delivery are the major goals of team organization; no specific teaching method is implied.

Although it is most often called "*interdisciplinary* team organization," single-subject teams are possible. However, interdisciplinary curriculum is considered to be an important feature of middle level education.[5] It is

valid, therefore, to use the phrase "interdisciplinary team organization" and to consider interdisciplinary curriculum as a goal.

In a previous quotation, George and Oldaker lay out the key characteristics of this organizational model: (1) an interdisciplinary team of teachers who share (2) a common group of students, (3) a common planning period, and (4) adjacent classroom space.

Within these basic parameters, teams vary widely in size, subject assignments, autonomy, and professional responsibilities. Many schools mix and match team structures, using different team sizes or subject combinations, based on teacher credentials and teaching interests and on student needs. For example, to ease student transition, a school might continue self-contained, one-teacher classrooms in grade 6, then move into teaming structures for grades 7 and 8.

Varied structures within a grade may be used to provide greater student and parent choice. Teaming may also be used to combine grades; a student might be assigned to one multi-grade team for all of his or her middle grade years.

A team is responsible for delivering certain academic subjects--usually the basics--to its group of students. Teachers have developed many approaches to dealing with their subject assignments. On some teams, teachers stay within their subject specialities; on others, they cross subject boundaries to a greater or lesser degree. In discussing various team/subject combinations, Alexander and George highlight the potential of the uneven match, that is, assigning more subjects than there are teachers. This forces team members to become creative in dealing with their "extra" subject. In particular, Alexander and George cite the three-teacher team assigned four

subjects as a model that--by necessity--evokes a high degree of team planning and cooperation.[6]

Whatever team size(s) or combinations are chosen, the basic goal of interdisciplinary teaming is to promote teacher collegiality, which not only benefits teachers personally, but empowers them to jointly improve instruction for students. Students have the benefit of learning from subject specialists, but in a more coordinated, student-centered way than is typical of the subject-centered, departmentalized plan of the high school.[7] Like so many other aspects of middle level education, teaming is designed not to imitate elementary or secondary education, but to serve as a bridge between the two.

Some tasks commonly delegated to teams are:

- distributing teaching assignments, e.g., determining who will teach which subjects or classes;
- scheduling instruction within the assigned time block;
- grouping and re-grouping students for instruction;
- deciding how to make use of the team's shared or adjacent instructional space(s);
- coordinating academic skills and content across subjects and developing interdisciplinary curriculum units;
- identifying topics for, and often delivering, the student advisory program;
- setting team-wide discipline rules and working together on student behavior (consulting with specialists if needed);
- conducting joint parent/student conferences;
- having some control over textbooks and materials budgets;
- using common grading standards.

But there seems to be no definite task list because, as Merenbloom says:

> Every team is unique. No other team has the same teachers or the same students. As a result, each team will have its own personality, strengths, and limitations. Each team must develop its own structure to accomplish its goals and purposes.[8]

## ADVANTAGES OF INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION TO STUDENTS

**ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT** Case reports of junior high schools that changed into middle schools usually highlight an accompanying rise in academic achievement.[9] But these gains cannot be attributed solely to interdisciplinary teaming. Two direct reviews, dated 1982 and 1989, concluded that teaming arrangements alone do not make a significant impact on academic achievement.[10]

**AFFECTIVE MEASURES** The psychological benefits to students are clearer. Cotton examined eight studies that compared teaming to traditional organization on student affective measures (e.g., self-concept, attitudes toward school, interest in school subjects). She concluded that six of the eight studies favored teaming, either slightly or significantly.[11] Team organization has been found to have a positive affect on interracial relationships.[12]

Students seem to like teaming. One school found, during its implementation years, that:

> Each year, less than five percent of team students asked for a transfer out of teaming. A much larger percentage of non-team pupils wanted to join a team.
>
> At the end of each year, team students filled out a confidential questionnaire. Overall, their responses heavily favored teaming. They liked most being with the same group all day and rotating classes within the team block. Also, they enjoyed belonging to a team and felt it made them work harder academically. Their teachers, they said, knew them better as individuals than did previous non-team teachers.[13]

**INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM** The value to students of an interdisciplinary curriculum emphasis and coordination of learning skills was discussed in the previous Practitioner's Monograph on interdisciplinary curriculum.[14]

**DISCIPLINE** George and Oldaker's 130 exemplary schools reported that all criteria relating to student discipline improved very significantly when they adopted the middle school model. One-quarter of their anecdotal responses specifically reported that "interdisciplinary team organization and grouping students in houses enabled teachers to develop consistent procedures for handling disruptions."[15]

**STUDENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS** Teams of teachers with their common group of students can form what Paul George calls "authentic learning communities."[16] According to Joan Lipsitz, incorporating students into a team or house "minimizes size, personalizes the environment, increases communication between students and teachers and reduces tension."[17]

**INSTRUCTIONAL FLEXIBILITY** Student-teacher closeness and flexible, varied instruction are two pillars of middle level educational philosophy. Teaming seems to facilitate both. A team has more minds and hands with which to address the varied and rapidly-changing needs of early adolescents. Frequently teams work within an extended time block schedule, which facilitates flexible use of instructional time and learning modes.

Thus, it seems that team organization offers many avenues toward student improvement. Arhar, Johnston, and Markle conclude their review by asking:

> Does teaming make a difference in student outcomes? The answer is that it probably does, but not in direct, easily discernable ways. It appears as if teaming is a manifestation of a commitment on the part of teachers to engage in teacher-student relations that facilitate growth and individual student development. That teaming causes the philosophical commitment is unlikely; that it gives teachers the ability to translate this commitment into action is almost certain.
>
> Furthermore, teaming does permit certain conditions to exist that are directly related to instructional effectiveness and

> student success. It reduces isolation and anonymity; it allows teachers to know their students quite well; and it permits teachers to "gang up" on students in positive ways to affect their learning.[18]

## ADVANTAGES OF INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION TO TEACHERS

**COLLEGIALITY AND EMPOWERMENT** The benefits to teachers appear to be extremely powerful. The professional sharing and support found in teaming breaks down the traditional isolation of the classroom teacher and supports a new professional ethos.

Today's educational literature is full of calls to empower teachers through enhanced collegiality. Cohen, for example, asserts that: "The essence of continual professional control and intellectual growth lies in stimulating contact with peers."[19]

Judith W. Little found that collegial norms are more typical of successful than unsuccessful schools, and that teamed teachers tend to take a more active role in school site decision-making.[20] Doda found that teamed teachers in a middle school felt more important, more responsible, and had a greater sense of power and control than did teachers in a nearby departmentalized junior high school.[21] Erb also found a stronger sense of efficacy:

> Teachers seemed confident of their decisions about students...Several principals and counselors emphasized to me how well they thought teachers kept on top of students' problems and made decisions to help those students....When two, three or four teachers reached a joint decision to help a student, they mutually reinforced each other in working with that student.[22]

Rutherford reported from his survey of both novice and veteran team teachers:

> Although they expressed concerns, an overwhelming majority of teachers responded emphatically that they would continue team

> teaching. Their reasons were varied, but most often they cited the value of sharing ideas and the support from team members.
>
> Other advantages mentioned were: You can teach in areas where you have the greatest strength and interest. More minds result in more and better teaching ideas and materials. Personality conflicts between teachers and students can be minimized. You can develop a greater variety and enriched quality of instructional options. When you are absent or not feeling well, team members can take over, and the instructional program continues without interruption.[23]

Chissom *et. el.*, in a 1986 study of middle school teachers, looked for factors associated with professional satisfaction. They found that "faculty cooperation" rated highest among factors that encouraged teachers to do their best.[24]

California teachers seem eager for more cooperation. The Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) organization, in a 1985 survey of over 800 K-12 teachers, found that 92 percent wanted their colleagues' help when problems arose with parents or students, but only 33 percent reported that their colleagues were able to offer such assistance. Ninety-three percent wanted scheduled time during the work day in which to hold professional discussions with colleagues, but only 14 percent reported that they were granted such time.[25]

The traditional norms of teaching emphasize privacy, isolation, and territoriality about one's classroom. They discourage sharing professional work or asking for assistance. This is especially hard on the novice teacher, but it can cripple the professional growth of all teachers.[26] Lieberman speaks of "the powerful infantilizing effects of the school as it is currently structured" and of "the tremendous impoverishment of teachers' professional lives," in which they have no time or place to read, think, or talk about education.[27]

With such norms governing their professional lives, it is not surprising that--however much they claim to want collegiality--teachers may seem

uncomfortable when the opportunity arises. Often, this is simply anxiety about changing one's routine, or a lack of the skills needed for successful teamwork. These can be remedied with training. Whatever their anxiety about going into team organization, "team organization is proving to be a more rewarding arrangement for the vast majority of teachers who are involved in it than were the alternate arrangements that teachers had previously experienced."[28]

Considering the prevalence of school cultures based on teacher isolation and distrust, new school cultures of teacher professionalism, empowerment, and collegiality are not likely to arise overnight. According to Lieberman, the principal plays a strong role in either fostering or blocking this change. A principal can initiate the change in norms by encouraging and rewarding collegial work. One way to do that is by establishing interdisciplinary teams.[29]

**ADULT FRIENDSHIP AND SUPPORT** There are personal, as well as professional, benefits: warmth, friendship, and socialization with adults. It seems to help many: "Even some veteran teachers reported having difficult years when team membership provided the moral support that carried them through that year."[30] And: "The gratification of adult relationships in the schools can tide a teacher over the bad days when young adolescents go for the jugular."[31]

## INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMING AS A FACTOR IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Teaming can be a powerful force for change in a school, because it can expand the role of teachers: giving them greater input into classroom and schoolwide decision-making and providing more opportunities for leadership. Team meetings are a vital source of ideas for school improvement.[32]

Teaming fosters better communication. This can be a key factor in disseminating change. Corbett found that innovative teaching behaviors spread quickly through some teaching teams, concluding that, "Increasing interdependence increases the probability that important knowledge obtained by a few teachers will find its way to others....Of course, promoting interdependence does not ensure that widespread change will follow. It only removes some organizational barriers."[33]

Improved communication spreads beyond the team. Erb found that parent communication became more frequent. Parent contact also came earlier in problem development, since teams tended to identify learning problems earlier. Communication with school counselors also increased, and counselors' work was facilitated because they could meet simultaneously with a whole team of teachers. Teacher-administrator dialogue also expanded. As face-to-face communications increased, paper work decreased.[34]

## POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS TO INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION

Logistical problems with schedules and facilities are likely to occur, but "people" problems tend to be the crux of difficulties. Some teachers resist joining teams. They may fear loss of their autonomy or familiar routine. A few may simply dislike--or lack the personality for--working with others. Subject specialists may fear dilution of their academic content, due to the shift in focus from "subjects" to "students."[35] On the other hand, teachers coming from self-contained classrooms may dislike the shift from full responsibility for thirty students to partial responsibility for one hundred or more; although the goal of interdisciplinary teaming is to bring teachers

into *more* contact with students, some self-contained teachers feel it as a *loss* of contact.[36]

Any team may suffer personality problems or professional conflicts. Team members seem to fear the occurrence of conflict and most lack any training in dealing with it.[37]

Johnson and Johnson conducted a meta-analysis of studies of adults in cooperative, competitive, and individualized situations. Cooperation produced more achievement, better personal relations, and higher self-esteem, but *only* in groups which were carefully structured for positive interdependence and whose members were trained in group process skills, such as leadership, communication, trust building, decision-making, and conflict management.[38] In other words, teachers need to be trained for cooperative work with other adults; it requires skills they have seldom been called on to practice in the traditional "isolated" classroom.

Even with solid training, teaming in the "interdisciplinary" sense is not guaranteed. Several studies indicate that teachers cooperate and communicate on students, discipline, and logistical issues, but that shared instructional planning and real curriculum fusion are rare.[39] Administrators might give teams a push in this direction by requiring one or more interdisciplinary units each year. Assigning such a unit early on might give teachers the common task and purpose that draws them together into a team, or interdisciplinary planning might be stressed later, after team members have had a year or two to get used to each other.

Consideration must be given to the teachers who do not team. It is not uncommon for a school to use both team and non-team structures in the core subjects, and specialist teachers (music, art, PE, etc.) often remain

permanently outside the team structure. If the teams gain power within the school, non-team teachers may feel isolated, or even jealous or resentful.[40]

## IMPLEMENTING INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM ORGANIZATION

It is apparently common practice to begin with a pilot team of committed volunteers, who work out the "kinks" in the system and generate enthusiasm among students and other teachers who witness their success. Cole Middle School began with one team in the eighth grade, and found that each year more and more teachers asked to team. The entire school was teamed in five years.[41]

**STUDENT GROUPING** Authors seem to agree that heterogeneous grouping should be used. This empowers teachers to group and re-group their students for varied instruction. At least one school made a slight exception to random grouping: it evenly distributed students known to be discipline problems.[42]

**TEAM SIZE** No one offers an ideal team size, but there seems to be a tendency to favor smallness. Rutherford found that teams of six or more tend to subdivide into independent pairs or trios.[43] Clark and Clark suggest teams of two to four as the most manageable; logistics grow complicated when teams get larger.[44]

The most common pattern is the four-teacher team offering the core subjects (usually English, social studies, mathematics, and science) to a group of 100-150 students. But this is far from the only option, nor is it necessarily the best in all cases. [45]

**TEAM FORMATION** Merenbloom suggests that principals set the parameters for subject areas to be taught, as well as for ethnic, gender, and seniority balance, then let teachers form themselves into teams.[46] Vandenbulke suggests

that the principal---with faculty input--should form teams--that blend personalities, teaching styles and strengths, and working styles (for example, mixing "idea people" with "organizers.")[47]

**TEAM LEADERS** Teams may have leaders appointed by the administration; they may appoint their own leaders; or they may agree to share or rotate leadership duties. Those duties usually consist of coordinating team projects, managing team meetings, and linking with other leaders and the administration for cross-team communication.[48] The linkage role might also be filled by a team coordinator: an assistant principal, a counselor, or a teacher.[49]

**TEAM BUILDING** Merenbloom suggests these as the important steps in the team building process:

- members really get to know each other, building trust and honest communication;
- they clarify roles and expectations between themselves and with others outside the team;
- they determine how the team will function (e.g., what decision-making process it will use); and
- they set team goals.[50]

The administration can assist team formation by clarifying expectations, reducing ambiguity, and providing formal structures. Keith found that such formalism reduced role strain for teachers.[51]

**SCHEDULING PLANNING TIME FOR TEACHERS** Teaming *does* require more time from teachers. Like most other authors on the subject, Merenbloom stresses the importance of planning periods:

> Teaching teams need several periods per week for team planning activities. Without team planning periods it is virtually impossible for a team of teachers to be effective. These team planning periods should be part of the regular work day and should not be taken from duty-free periods that may be guaranteed by the teachers' contract.

> Administrators and supervisors must gear their expectations of a team's accomplishments to the number of periods available for meetings. Teachers must realize too that team planning time is a part of their regular work day and that they are professionally accountable for the use of the time.[52]

Team meetings can be used for sharing information, discussing students, planning instruction, for parent/student conferences, or for staff development. With so many tasks to accomplish, the careful planning and productive use of meeting time is considered very important.[53]

**TAKING TEAM BUILDING BEYOND TEACHERS** When a team shares a common group of students, it can give those students a smaller group with which to identify, as in a "house" plan. Such groups can develop unique identities through common activities, such as interdisciplinary units, a team newsletter, or special events (e.g., speakers, field trips, parties). Teams may form the basis for school competitions and intramurals, thus becoming a focus for school spirit and pride.[54]

## CONCLUSION

Student affective growth, integrated learning, improved discipline, warmer teacher-student relationships, more flexible instruction, teacher empowerment and professionalism, school spirit: these are all claimed as some of the benefits of interdisciplinary team organization. It almost sounds too good to be true--like education's latest snake-oil cure. Arhar, Johnston, and Markle inject a note of caution:

> Teaming is an organizational change that *may* affect the way instruction is delivered in the school. It is also a way of restructuring human interaction among teachers, and possibly, among students, so that the school *can* become a collection of smaller, relatively cohesive groups. In other words, teaming creates an opportunity for things to be done differently in the school; it does not assure that they will be.[55]

But the potential is there for substantive change. This may explain why the authorities quoted at the beginning of this monograph consider interdisciplinary team organization so vital to middle level education.

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